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Disputatio Pro Quo? The Search for Lutheran Education

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DISPUTATIO PRO QUO? THE SEARCH FOR LUTHERAN EDUCATION

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Walter Bouman's essay, "What is the Lutheran Tradition?", speaks particularly to the question of Lutheran identity. Implicit in his argument is the fact that identity - being able to articulate what is unique or distinct about the Lutheran tradition - is important if the Lutheran affiliation of colleges is to be meaningful now and in the future. Bouman begins by offering Alasdair MacIntyre's definition of tradition as "an historically extended, socially embodied argument." This definition suggests that a living tradition embodies "continuities of conflict." Bouman then goes on to offer five theological themes from a historical perspective, which he sees as the core arguments comprising the Lutheran tradition; the Lutheran tradition as Biblical, Catholic, Evangelical, Sacramental and World-Affirming.

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Luther's proposed curriculum, which included training in biblical languages, emphasized an individual's ability to reason over the authority of the ruling church bodies.

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In addressing the question of identity with a view to history, Bouman places emphasis on something we all know well on a personal level, that continuity with the past is the key element of present and future self-definition. The reason I know I am the same individual that I was years prior is because of the story I tell about myself. Similarly, if there is to be any pride or even identity in calling a college Lutheran (and not just a nominal or financial association) it must begin with an understanding of the past that creates continuity with where we are now and where we hope to be in the future. Bouman offers his five themes as the substance of the inner-Lutheran argument and leaves it to us to carry on the tradition by continuing to discuss and elaborate on them. Furthermore, he challenges us to recognize the Lutheran tradition as one voice amid larger arguments such as the Christian tradition and the argument over what it means to be human.

In our response, we would like to do as Bouman suggests and recognize Lutheranism as one voice within the larger argument of what compromises good higher education. Similar to Bouman's historical perspective on his five themes, we point out that this Lutheran voice has a continuity with the past that can be drawn on to provide a sense of identity for our colleges and their place within the larger academy. We offer a brief glance at one historical event which has been important to our thoughts in the search for Lutheran academia and which offers useful perspectives to the discussion of higher education. This event is Luther's curriculum reform at Wittenberg University. The reform is an interesting place to begin addressing the Lutheran voice in higher education.

As a professor at Wittenberg University, Luther spent several years formulating and fighting for changes in the curriculum. Luther was unsatisfied with the methodology of medieval scholasticism, which emphasized the dictation of doctrine and authority of the church institution over a student's own direct engagement with the biblical text. Inspired by certain humanistic principles, Luther adopted a position which challenged this method and the then current curriculum at Wittenberg. He proposed that the university begin to introduce lectures on classical authors and offer, for the first time, instruction in Greek and Hebrew language. This training provided the students with the skills they needed to encounter the scriptures themselves and to ponder important theological questions. In the spring of 1518, only months after the 'posting' of his 95 theses, Luther's reforms were actually instituted.

The nature of these reforms was vitally linked to Luther's own theological development. His conception of justification by faith and his assertion that no one person or body of persons had the authority to dictate for all the true interpretation of holy scripture formed a foundation for his approach to theological education. These notions gave the students at Wittenberg the awesome responsibility, or even obligation, to read and interpret the biblical text. It forcefully asserted the primacy of the biblical text and acknowledged God's gift of revelation. Certainly, in the classroom and pulpit, Luther argued for his own interpretation of scripture and his legacy provides evidence that he did so persuasively. However, his curriculum reforms and the premises upon which they were founded tell us that he did not believe his understanding to be the only valuable one. His teachings were not intended to replace a student's own engagement with scripture.

To be sure, the motives and results of Luther's reforms present a complex picture which can be viewed from many different angles. In thinking about our philosophy of higher education, it is the spirit of these reforms that we have found most useful and which may be helpful in the search for

Lutheran academia. As Luther proposed to give the students at Wittenberg the skills they needed to engage the biblical text, we believe that we also have a responsibility to provide students with every possible tool for understanding and drawing conclusions in our respective fields. In the classroom, we do not hesitate to offer students our own interpretations of a certain topic and we encourage students to practice the important skill of arguing their perspective in a persuasive manner. However, in the spirit of Luther's reform, we find it imperative to acknowledge that our understanding is neither the ultimate authority nor the final word on a matter. The presentation of an instructor's perspective cannot replace a student's own engagement with the relevant subject matter. With respect to Lutheranism, "Our challenge is to give the tradition life in the context of the academy and allow it to rub up against the disciplines and epistemologies of the modern world." (Keljo, p.14) This implies that we trust in the authority of the Christian gospels and believe that the value of Lutheran tradition will stand on its own merit if students are made aware of it.

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Luther's curriculum reform and our reflection on it is only one small part of the Lutheran voice in the argument over good higher education, In mentioning this example, we hope concerning Luther and Lutheranism to students and staff to emphasize that the simple presentation of issues will go a long way toward establishing meaning in the Lutheran affiliation of colleges and creating the dialog which is the life of the tradition itself. We do not mean that colleges should make courses in Luther mandatory for all, but that in some way (through lectures, reading in the freshmen curriculum or introductory sessions for new professors) students and staff should become familiar with the events that shaped the tradition and its relationship to the academy. Regardless of how individuals choose to embrace the tradition, it is important to recognize that when they come to a Lutheran school (by choice or chance) the Lutheran tradition becomes, at least in some way, part of their life and they become part of the Lutheran tradition.

Being at a Lutheran college, we suggest, means that the Lutheran voice will be represented more frequently in larger discussion, by a faculty member or student who feels the perspective may have something important to offer to a given discussion. It is in this context that students and faculty members will take themes and historical reflection like those offered by Bouman and carry them into intra-Lutheran dialogue and dialogue where Lutheranism is one voice in a larger discussion. The tradition will naturally evolve with the currents of the present and the future.

From a historical perspective, Bouman sought to convince us that the Lutheran tradition is distinctive. For him, Lutheranism is not to be characterized by any one trait but by many traits whose significance has been discussed and debated over the course of time. In a similar way, we suggest that there is a uniquely Lutheran voice in the argument over good higher education. In offering the example of Luther's curriculum reform, we hope to encourage discussion on the history of Lutheranism and the academy and how that history is relevant to the present identity of the Lutheran college.

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